

Policy nerds plot their revenge

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(Crain's) — Any school kid can tell you that there are two kinds of people in the world: the ones who get pushed around, and the ones who do the pushing.

Now, after at least half-a-century of being on the short end of such a power dynamic, one local group of pushees has decided to bulk up and strike back. Call it the revenge of the policy nerds.

What's going on is that the new Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is about to start the process of drafting and issuing its 2040 plan that will lay out the region's growth patterns for the next couple of generations: Where we're going and what we need to get there.

But it's far from certain that Chicago's usually out-clouted transit and land-use planners will end up prevailing against their adversaries — pork-seeking politicians and big developers — however sensible their ideas.

Before you roll your eyes and click to another story, this really is serious, if wonky, stuff. Mucho \$\$\$\$\$\$ is involved.

In a well-planned world, airports don't get expanded in the backyards of tens of thousands of homeowners, commuters don't get stuck in the cold waiting for dirty and crowded trains, and productive cornfields don't get plowed under for subdivisions when plenty of affordable land is available for reuse in town.

Yet, all that and more has occurred here because no one has had the power to tell dollar-hungry developers that it doesn't make sense to build houses in an area with neither roads nor sewers, schools nor electricity.

As a result, our cost of living is markedly higher than it ought to be — and commuting becomes an agony because no one thought to build the office complex near where the workers would live.

To correct that, Chicago civic group Metropolis 2020 launched a campaign in Springfield to combine two groups that, by federal law, control billions of dollars in federal capital grants: the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission and the Chicago Area Transportation Study.

Metropolis 2020 pretty much got its way, and under the direction of Randy Blankenhorn, the CMAP has begun work on a proposal designed to evoke the legacy of the legendary Daniel "make-no-small-plans" Burnham, the father of Chicago's lakefront park system.

Of particular importance is how Mr. Blankenhorn says the new group will approach giving a thumbs-up or thumbs-down to requests for billions of dollars in federal aid for new expressways, Metra train lines, expansion of the Chicago Transit Authority, water/sewer lines and the like. Without such items, no one could get to use or live in any development, however posh.

In the past, every big project every big political leader wanted went on one gigantic list.

That left it to U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., and other Congress folk to somehow set priorities for us, since the feds never would fund it all.

This time, Mr. Blankenhorn says the region actually will use metrics — yardsticks to value each proposed project against an absolute standard — to allow the region to set its own priorities.

For instance, will a particular proposal worsen flooding? Are large numbers of jobs within an easy commute? The metrics are being developed in cooperation with the Chicago Community Trust, a local civic organization.

“We’re not going to go to the lowest common denominator and call it ‘consensus.’ This board wants to make a difference,” he says. “(Approved) capital projects will have to support the vision of the region.”

Brave words. Can he deliver?

Mr. Blankenhorn concedes that whatever he or other planners want, the ultimate decisions on what to spend where will be made by elected officials.

“Policymakers will decide what’s in the plan, not staff,” he puts it.

Metropolis 2020 chief George Ranney says what’s going on so far is “promising, very promising.”

Still, he adds, “The key is whether that group of people will be tough-minded. We think they will — if they get the right information.”

Big money inevitably tends to win out in this town.

But I’m willing to be convinced that rising gasoline prices and an increasing green sentiment perhaps are changing public opinion. Let’s just say that CMAP and its 2040 plan are an experiment worth watching.

Hopefully, they won’t get too much sand kicked in their face.